A History of Beijing

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Introduction

Beijing stands as one of the world's most remarkable cities—a metropolis where three thousand years of continuous human habitation intersect with the rhythms of one of the fastest-evolving societies on the planet. Throughout its long and storied past, Beijing has served not only as a stage for great historical events but also as a crucible in which China's political, cultural, and architectural traditions have been forged and transformed. The city's history is as intricate as its fabled alleyways, defined by cycles of dynastic ambition, foreign rule, imperial splendor, revolution, and unrelenting modernization.

Founded as a walled city on the northern fringes of the early Chinese world, Beijing began its journey as Jicheng, the seat of ancient states and a bulwark against nomadic incursions. Over the centuries, it was shaped as much by outside influences as by internal innovation, repeatedly rising from the ashes of conquest and devastation. The Liao, Jin, and Yuan dynasties elevated Beijing into one of the world's great capitals, laying out city plans and monuments whose echoes can still be seen in Beijing's street grid and skyline today.

In the Ming and Qing dynasties, Beijing reached the zenith of imperial grandeur. The construction of the Forbidden City, the imposing city walls, and the sprawling imperial gardens reflected an ambition to embody and govern a vast empire. But Beijing was also the site of turmoil—wars, foreign occupations, and uprisings that tested, challenged, and remade its identity. With the fall of the Qing dynasty, the city entered an era of uncertainty, alternating between rapid modernization and the trauma of occupation and civil strife.

The establishment of the People's Republic in 1949 marked a profound new beginning. Fuelled by ideological zeal and a vision for a modern socialist state, Beijing transformed itself yet again—destroying much of its old urban fabric to make way for monumental squares, grand avenues, and factories. The Cultural Revolution unleashed chaos but also paved the way for a later burst of energy that would fuel China's rise as a global power. Since the late 20th century, Beijing has been at the forefront of economic reform, urban expansion, and cultural renaissance—emerging as a center of art, technology, business, and international diplomacy.

Yet the story of Beijing is more than a chronicle of emperors, revolutions, and economic miracles. It is a narrative of ordinary people living in the shadows of palaces, along ancient hutong, and within gleaming skyscrapers. Their struggles, innovations, adaptations, and aspirations have made Beijing a living city—one that is resilient, continually reinventing itself, and always at the heart of China's unfolding history.

This book traces Beijing’s evolution from its prehistoric origins to its present as a global city. Through twenty-five chapters, it explores the city’s key moments, enduring features, and the complex forces—environmental, political, social, and cultural—that have shaped it over millennia. In examining Beijing’s past, we gain not only insight into a fascinating urban tapestry but also a deeper understanding of China itself in all its dynamism and complexity.

CHAPTER ONE: Early Humans and the Origins of Settlement

Long before the first walls of any city rose from the plains, long before emperors dreamed of celestial mandates or grand canals, the land that would one day cradle Beijing was already ancient, its hills and river valleys witness to the earliest stirrings of human presence. The story of Beijing does not begin with bricks and mortar, nor with edicts and dynasties, but with the patient chipping of stone tools, the flicker of nascent campfires, and the slow, inexorable march of human evolution across a landscape vastly different from the bustling metropolis of today. To understand Beijing, one must first delve into this deep past, into an era when the very definition of 'human' was still being forged.

The most dramatic evidence of this profound antiquity lies a short journey southwest of the modern city center, in the unassuming limestone hills of Zhoukoudian. Here, within a network of caves, particularly one known as Dragon Bone Hill (Longgushan), the earth yielded secrets that would rewrite the story of humanity. For centuries, local people had occasionally found "dragon bones"—fossilized remains they believed held medicinal properties. It wasn't until the early 20th century, however, that these bones attracted scientific attention, leading to one of the most significant paleontological discoveries ever made.

The quest began in earnest in the 1920s, spurred by tantalizing finds of ancient-looking quartz tools and teeth. Swedish geologist and archaeologist Johan Gunnar Andersson, alongside Austrian paleontologist Otto Zdansky, initiated systematic excavations. In 1921 and 1923, Zdansky found two hominid teeth, but, in a display of scholarly caution bordering on the heroic, he refrained from announcing them until 1926. It was Canadian anatomist Davidson Black, working at the Peking Union Medical College, who recognized their immense significance. Upon examining one of these teeth, and later another discovered by Chinese paleontologist Pei Wenzhong, Black boldly proposed a new species and genus: *Sinanthropus pekinensis*, or "Peking Man." Some in the scientific community thought him rash, basing an entire new human ancestor on a few teeth, but Black’s conviction, and the promise of more finds, spurred further work.

The excavations at Zhoukoudian, largely under the meticulous direction of Pei Wenzhong and later Jia Lanpo, soon hit pay dirt, and then some. Between 1929, when Pei unearthed the first nearly complete skullcap, and the interruption of work by war in 1937, the caves yielded an astonishing collection: multiple skullcaps, jawbones, teeth, and limb fragments belonging to over forty individual hominids. These were not our

direct ancestors, *Homo sapiens*, but an earlier species, *Homo erectus*. The "Peking Man" remains dated to a staggering period between approximately 770,000 and 230,000 years ago, placing these early inhabitants of the Beijing region firmly within the Pleistocene epoch, often known as the Ice Age.

Life for Peking Man at Zhoukoudian was a far cry from a stroll down Wangfujing. The climate fluctuated, but was generally cooler than today, with periods of intense cold. The landscape was a mosaic of forest and grassland, teeming with animals that now sound like a fantastical bestiary: giant hyenas, saber-toothed cats, massive deer (*Megaceros*), wild boar, and elephants. Peking Man was both hunter and hunted. The caves provided shelter, a refuge from the elements and predators. Evidence suggests they were hunter-gatherers, exploiting the rich local fauna and flora.

The thousands of stone tools found alongside their remains offer a glimpse into their technical capabilities. These tools, primarily choppers and scrapers fashioned from quartz and flint, were simple but effective for butchering animals, processing hides, and working wood. They represent a Mode 1 or Oldowan-like technology, later developing into an early Acheulean tradition. These were not finely crafted arrowheads or polished axes; these were implements born of necessity, functional and rugged, reflecting the harsh realities of their existence. There is little evidence of aesthetic sensibility in their tool-making; survival was the paramount concern.

One of the most debated aspects of Peking Man’s life is the use of fire. Thick ash layers, burned bones, and charred seeds within the caves were initially interpreted as definitive proof of controlled fire use. This was a revolutionary idea for such an early hominid, suggesting a significant cognitive leap – fire for warmth, for cooking, for protection against predators, and as a focus for social life. However, more recent re-examinations have cast some doubt. Some scholars argue the "ash layers" might be naturally occurring organic deposits, and the burned bones could have resulted from natural fires. While the evidence remains tantalizing, the consensus is leaning towards Peking Man being, at the very least, an opportunistic user of natural fires, perhaps learning to maintain them, even if the ability to create fire at will was not yet fully developed. Cooking food, if practiced, would have had profound implications, making nutrients more accessible and food safer to eat, potentially contributing to brain development.

The sheer volume of fossil material found at Zhoukoudian also allowed for unprecedented study of *Homo erectus* population variation. The individuals ranged from young children to older adults, providing insights into their growth and development. Their brain capacity, averaging around 1,040 cubic centimeters, was significantly larger than earlier hominids like *Australopithecus*, but smaller than that of modern humans (which averages around 1,350 cc). They walked upright, much like us, but their skulls were characterized by a low, receding forehead, prominent brow ridges, and a thick cranial vault.

Tragically, the original Peking Man fossils, the crown jewels of Zhoukoudian, met a mysterious and lamentable fate. In 1941, with Japanese forces advancing in China, arrangements were made to ship the precious specimens to the United States for safekeeping. They were packed into crates and supposedly handed over to US Marines for transport from Peking to the port of Qinhuangdao. Somewhere in this chaotic period, the fossils vanished. Theories abound: were they sunk on a Japanese ship? Seized by Japanese soldiers? Hidden and lost? Buried somewhere along the railway? Despite numerous searches and tantalizing, often bogus, leads over the decades, the original bones have never been recovered. Fortunately, excellent casts and detailed descriptions made by Franz Weidenreich, who meticulously studied the fossils before their disappearance, remain, allowing scientific study to continue, albeit with the profound regret of losing the authentic material.

The story of early humans in the Beijing region does not end with Peking Man. The caves at Zhoukoudian continued to serve as a desirable residence for later hominids. In a higher-level cave, known as the Upper Cave, fossil remains of anatomically modern humans, *Homo sapiens*, were discovered. These "Upper Cave Men" (and women, and children) lived much more recently, around 27,000 to 10,000 years ago, placing them in the Late Paleolithic.

These were our direct ancestors, and their presence marks a significant step forward in human development. The three well-preserved skulls from the Upper Cave show features characteristic of early modern humans, though with some regional variations that have sparked discussion about the origins of modern East Asian populations. Their toolkit was more sophisticated than that of Peking Man, including bone needles, suggesting the sewing of fitted clothing – a vital adaptation in a cool climate.

Perhaps most strikingly, the Upper Cave yielded evidence of ritual and symbolism. Perforated animal teeth, shells, and stone beads, many stained with red ochre, were found, suggesting they were worn as ornaments. One of the most poignant discoveries was the burial of several individuals, their bodies sprinkled with hematite powder, a red mineral pigment often associated with ritual practices in prehistoric societies worldwide. This suggests not only a nascent aesthetic sense but also a developing spiritual or ceremonial life, a concern for the dead that transcends mere practical disposal. The presence of these relatively advanced cultural traits signifies a major cognitive and behavioral shift from their *Homo erectus* predecessors.

The environment around Zhoukoudian during the time of Upper Cave Man was still a challenging one, experiencing the fluctuations of the Last Glacial Maximum. However, these early *Homo sapiens* were clearly well-adapted, skilled hunters of deer and gazelle, and gatherers of wild plants. They represented a new wave of human expansion, equipped with greater ingenuity and a more complex social and cultural toolkit.

As the last ice sheets retreated and the climate warmed and stabilized around 10,000 years ago, the stage was set for another profound transformation in human history: the Neolithic Revolution. This was not an overnight event but a gradual transition, yet its consequences were monumental, paving the way for settled life, agriculture, and eventually, the rise of cities like Beijing.

Throughout the wider Beijing municipality, archaeologists have unearthed numerous Neolithic sites, testament to a growing human population adapting to new environmental conditions. The shift from a nomadic or semi-nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle to one based on farming was slow and patchy, but relentless. The fertile alluvial plains, watered by rivers like the Yongding – a river that would play a crucial role in Beijing’s history for millennia – became attractive locations for these early agricultural communities.

These Neolithic villagers began to cultivate crops, with millet being a key staple in northern China. Millet, drought-resistant and suited to the loess soils of the region, provided a more reliable food source than foraging alone. While hunting and fishing didn't disappear overnight, the ability to grow and store grain allowed for larger, more permanent settlements. The domestication of animals, such as pigs and dogs, further stabilized the food supply and altered the human relationship with the natural world.

Life in a Neolithic village in the Beijing region would have revolved around the agricultural cycle. Dwellings were likely semi-subterranean pit houses, offering insulation against the cold winters and summer heat. These were clustered together, forming small communities. Pottery, a hallmark of the Neolithic, became widespread. Fired clay pots were essential for storing grain, cooking food, and perhaps for rituals. Early pottery was often coarse and utilitarian, but over time, distinct regional styles emerged, sometimes decorated with cord impressions, incised patterns, or painted designs, hinting at local traditions and perhaps even nascent artistic expression beyond simple ornamentation.

Stone tool technology also advanced significantly. Instead of just chipping and flaking, Neolithic people learned to grind and polish stone, creating more durable and efficient axes, adzes for woodworking, and hoes for tilling the soil. These polished stone tools represent a significant investment of time and skill, suggesting a more settled lifestyle where such investments were worthwhile.

The social organization of these early farming communities was likely based on kinship groups or clans. There is little evidence of significant social hierarchy or centralized political power in the earliest Neolithic settlements. Decisions were probably made communally, and life was a cooperative effort. However, the very act of settling down and investing in land and resources sowed the seeds for future social complexity. As populations grew and villages became more established, issues of land ownership,

resource management, and inter-village relations would have become more pressing.

These early farmers were profoundly connected to their environment. They understood the seasons, the patterns of rainfall, and the behavior of local wildlife. Their spiritual beliefs likely centered on fertility, the changing seasons, and ancestor veneration – common themes in early agricultural societies worldwide. While no grand temples or written records survive from this period in the Beijing area, the careful burial of the dead, sometimes with grave goods like pottery or tools, suggests a continued belief in an afterlife or the importance of honoring ancestors, a tradition that would echo through Chinese culture for millennia.

The Neolithic period in the Beijing region, stretching roughly from around 8,000 to 4,000 years ago, was a time of quiet but fundamental change. It was during these millennia that the foundations for settled civilization were laid. The hunter-gatherers of the Paleolithic had roamed the land, adapting to its rhythms. The farmers of the Neolithic began to actively shape it, clearing land, planting crops, and building enduring homes. They were the true pioneers, transforming the landscape from a wilderness into a humanized space.

While these early settlements were a far cry from the walled cities that would later define the region, they represented a critical stage in the human occupation of the Beijing plain. They demonstrated the viability of sustained settlement, the potential of agriculture to support growing populations, and the beginnings of complex social interaction. Without the patient toil and innovation of these anonymous Neolithic villagers, the stage would not have been set for the rise of Jicheng, the first named city in this area, and the subsequent unfolding of Beijing's long and dramatic history. The deep roots of Beijing are not in imperial decrees, but in the very soil, tilled by hands many thousands of years ago.

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